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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SENV](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH BISHOP OF TUMACO, NARINO  
DEPARTMENT

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) In a cordial hour-long lunch with the Ambassador, Gustavo Giron Higueta, Bishop of Tumaco, Narino Department (which borders Ecuador), explained that all of Colombia's illegal armed groups were operating near Tumaco, and that the ELN was involved in the region's drug trade. He said illicit crops had brought both ecological and moral damage to the area, and claimed that fumigation was damaging legitimate crops. The Bishop lamented the situation of Tumaco's Afro-Colombians and requested U.S. assistance to conduct a study of this demographic. He also stressed the need for an improved educational system and better public services. End summary.

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ELN INVOLVED IN DRUG TRADE?  
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¶2. (C) The Bishop said he had heard the ELN was involved in the drug trade in Tumaco's surrounding areas, but he didn't have "exact information." The Bishop's statement followed an assessment earlier in the day by DYNCORP fumigation personnel operating out of Tumaco that the ELN had become a narcotics player in the region. The Bishop explained that narcotics trafficking was a logical way for the ELN to support its high operating costs, "from food to weapons."

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BISHOP'S CONCERNS OVER LOCAL DRUG TRADE AND FUMIGATION  
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¶3. (C) The Bishop said the fundamental problem facing the Tumaco area was illicit crops. He said the drug trade had attracted guerrilla groups to the region and now, "all illegal groups are here." According to the Bishop, the drug trade normally caused seven killings a week in Tumaco. Other problems illicit crops had brought included ecological damage (a point that local DYNCORP employees also emphasized), moral damage to peasants who are forced into coca growing, and susceptibility to corruption among local authorities. The Bishop said he had been conducting a campaign among peasants to highlight the destructive nature of illicit crops, but explained that "most peasants don't want to give up coca growing yet. Some do, but not all."

14. (C) The Ambassador asked to what extent drug trafficking had affected the Tumaco area. The Bishop replied that a long coastline with ideal "hiding spots" and Tumaco's proximity to the porous Ecuadorian border augmented the region's vulnerability to trafficking. The Bishop doubted whether local fishermen were involved in drug trafficking as "all they have are small canoes." He thought larger scale fishermen were possibly involved, but said "they're not here in Tumaco." He referred to the Colombian Navy's (COLNAV) presence in the area as "positive," but expressed concern that COLNAV had removed a battalion from the Ecuadorian border approximately five years ago. With poor mobility between Tumaco and the border, the Bishop explained, "It doesn't make sense that the border is administered from here." He spoke well of military-community relations, but said they were "isolated" from one another.

15. (C) The Bishop complained about fumigation, claiming it was hurting other crops, such as platano, rice, and sugar, but agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that coca growers were hiding their plants among such legitimate crops. The Bishop expressed concern that fumigation aircraft were flying too high to distinguish between illicit and licit crops and requested lower flights. He referred to manual eradication as "ideal," but also agreed with the Ambassador that manual eradication involved prohibitively high human and financial costs.

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THE PLIGHT OF TUMACO'S AFRO-COLOMBIANS  
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16. (C) The Bishop expressed concern over the plight of Afro-Colombians in Tumaco and along the Pacific Coast, and requested U.S. assistance to conduct a "comprehensive study" of this issue. According to the Bishop, 90 percent of Tumaco

is of African descent. Afro-Colombians face problems as a result of their "isolation," as well as "a lack of community organization, administrative knowledge, and propensity for long-term planning." The Bishop said he had been assisting Afro-Colombians for 12 years in these areas, but much more was needed. The Ambassador said the United States had a "special interest" in the African community and wanted to explore collaborative possibilities.

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WHAT TUMACO NEEDS  
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17. (C) In addition to development assistance to Tumaco's Afro-Colombians, the Bishop highlighted the need to improve education and public services. He noted a 40 percent illiteracy rate in Tumaco and said in surrounding towns the rate was as high as 90 percent, explaining, "People can't even begin to think of economic development when they can't read." He indicated the situation was improving, explaining that Tumaco's adult night schools were full, but said a lack of teachers presented a problem of meeting education demands. He also expressed concerns over water service. He blamed the problem on a damaged aqueduct that does not provide sufficient water pressure, and said the water quality was "very bad."

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LOCAL GOVERNANCE ISSUES  
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18. (C) According to the Bishop, Narino is the country's most "marginalized" department, and Tumaco further suffers from a historic "policy of isolation" from department capital Pasto. He said he respected Narino Governor Eduardo Zuniga Eraso, but added, "He has done little for Tumaco." The Bishop explained the city's former mayors have been extremely corrupt, with ex-mayor Samuel Alberto Escruceria having "robbed" the city of approximately 16 million USD, but said the current mayor was capable and one of the best in recent years. He described church-community relations as "very

good," saying "people appreciate us and we can operate well."

He was proud of his recruitment of "native" priests, explaining that 13 of his priests were from Tumaco. He said another 40 priests were needed to effectively conduct all the church's social efforts.

WOOD